

71-year-old lawyer to be ordained priest, become prison chaplain

BY CHRISTINE KRALY

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People at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City call David Link "Doc."

From inmates to staff, they each greet the 71-year-old this way, so named for his four doctoral degrees.

He doesn't expect his nickname will change Saturday when he and two other deacons are ordained priests by the Most Rev. Dale J. Melczek at Holy Angels Cathedral in Gary.

At an age when most people dip into 401(k)s -- and following decades as the dean of two law schools, including at the University of Notre Dame -- Link is starting a career as a full-time chaplain at the prison.

Link's decision was inspired by encouragement from his late wife, Barbara, whom he calls "an absolute superstar."

She urged him into volunteering and lecturing at the prison. When she died of ovarian cancer in 2003, "I certainly got a call from the Holy Spirit," he said. "It wasn't on a cell phone, but it was a pretty clear call. When the Holy Spirit calls, he doesn't ask how old you are. He just has another job for you."

Link said all of his five children support his choice, and they are expected to attend his ordination. Though he is not one to look back, Link leaves behind a successful career practicing international business law, representing clients including the Atlanta Braves and the Harlem Globetrotters and teaching ethical legal practices.

He teaches now about forgiveness and self-reflection at the prison -- and counsels prisoners one-on-one.

On a walk Thursday through death row, Link gave an understated wave to each man, passing cells that held soda cans and even a cat.

He spends extended time in the building praying.

"It doesn't matter what religion they are," he said.

In the chapel, Link apologetically joked that one inmate with a prosthetic leg "wouldn't have a leg to stand on" in a legal case. It's the kind of casual but close bond he has formed with inmates. He describes one man's Popsicle-stick birdhouse like a proud father.

"I talk to them like their brother," he said.

"He knows their hearts," Harry Hobbs, an inmate of 14 years, said of Link.

Wearing a gold cross around his neck, Hobbs readied audio equipment in the prison chapel, once a theater. Hobbs, who helps prepare Link for his classes, said the deacon is a natural at the pulpit.

"We are really blessed to have him here," Hobbs said. "He's tremendous as far as how he delivers his message. He keeps your attention."

Some of his most powerful guidance comes in simple gestures, Link said.

When he began sending the men birthday cards, one inmate, "this big, tough-looking dude," came to his office crying with thanks. No one had ever sent him a birthday card before.

"If you had said to me 10 years ago when I was dean of the law school that I'd first of all go to the seminary, and second that I'd be here working with maximum security prisoners, I would have said you had a bad mental problem," he said.

For his former colleagues and admirers in the region, the news was not so shocking.

Dennis Dease, president of the University of St. Thomas, recruited Link in 2001 to run the law school there. Dease called Link "a person of great humanity, generous spirit and deep faith."

He called him "a master of the art of persuasion and a wonderful storyteller."

Link was ending his Notre Dame deanship when Hammond Mayor Tom McDermott Jr. entered law school there. When McDermott first settled into campus, Link met with him and encouraged him to do well.

"He said, 'We're going to be watching you,'" McDermott said. "He's an inspiration to a lot of students. I'm sitting today, where I am, in large part, because of his confidence."

As he prepares for his first Mass on Sunday at Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart -- "I'm nervous" -- Link reflected on the similarities between lawyer and priest.

"I have always believed that lawyers have to be healers," Link said.



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